THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR...

January 20, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Scripture
I John 4:13-19
Matthew 25:14-30

..."so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."
-Matthew 25:25a (NRSV)

This was going to be a sermon on responsibility. It was going to build on the parable Jesus told to his disciples about the three servants who are given money by their master. And how two of them invested the money wisely, earned a profit and were rewarded handsomely, and how the third servant took the money he had been given, the smallest of the three by the way, and hid it in the ground, for which he was treated as harshly as any character in the New Testament.

The sermon was going to suggest that more than anything else Jesus didn't want his disciples sitting around after he was gone glumly waiting for the end of the world. Nor did he want his disciples, after he was gone, to assume that their task was to avoid doing evil things, to settle into lives of respectable propriety. Rather, his expectation was that they would be responsible and imaginative. The sermon would have suggested that the whole point of the Gospel is to free us to be full, responsible human beings. And it would have suggested that we are not always as responsible as we could be. The sermon was going to focus on two areas of our common life in which, by this observer's lights, we have slid into irresponsibility. The first is in our national policy and posture on the critical matter of birth control, the fact that we lag far behind the world in contraception research, and not surprisingly far ahead of the world in unwanted pregnancies and therefore abortions. This Protestant was going to protest - and suggest that if we do value life and the freedom of individuals, we should be protecting, not limiting reproduction rights and we should certainly be investing very heavily in contraception, research and availability.

And the second issue about which this sermon would raise the demand for responsibility would have been guns; a record-breaking year for random killing in our nation and our city; a police officer murdered and five high school students shot on the same day; a police chief who, along with virtually every other police official in the country, is pleading for a rational and responsible law to restrict the availability of assault weapons and ammunition specifically designed to kill people and which would provide for a waiting period before an individual can purchase a handgun, which are the weapons used in 90% of the urban homicides. I was going to tell about sitting at a memorial breakfast on Tuesday morning, remembering Martin Luther King, Jr. who was shot with a high powered rifle,

sitting beside a young man who when he learned who I was said, "O yes, I know that church. I used to tutor there. But my student was shot." Just like that. And I thought, maybe it's time to suggest that responsible people should take responsibility for all of that.

I had hoped to stir up some things this morning and I'll come back to that sermon.

But then, what happened last week happened. And this preacher, along with every other preacher in the land realized that the agenda had just been put aside and it would not be responsible to stand up in a pulpit as if it were an ordinary Sunday.

So, I looked at the story in Matthew 25 again, very carefully, and I discovered something I didn't realize was there. Not that it's hidden. It's just that I was so intent on this whole responsibility business, I overlooked it before. This story is about fear.

Before there is irresponsibility in this story, there is fear.

The master summons his servants before he leaves on a journey. He distributes a lot of money. The small print at the bottom of the page will tell you that a talent is worth more than fifteen years' wages for a laborer. He gives one servant five, another servant two and a third servant one. The first two invest, take a risk. They "trade," a not uncommon, nor unfamiliar activity in this community, and they do very well. But, they had gambled. They could have lost it all. The master is delighted when he returns. The third servant played it safe. In fact, what he did was the traditional method of saving. No risks. No gains, but at least he conserved his master's capital. His master is furious; calls him wicked and lazy, throws him out of the household and gives his money to the first two. Did you notice that twist? It sounds familiar. The reward for being responsible is not early retirement and a handsome pension. It is more responsibility. Do a good job and you'll be asked to do another. Or as a church officer said to me when I asked him to do another and bigger job just last week: "Promotion comes fast around here!"

What caught my attention and redirected it, however, was what this third servant said on the day his master returned:

> "I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."

I was afraid. Aren't we all? What happened last week wasn't supposed to happen. Our leaders were supposed to get us out of there and persuade the other side to back off without shots fired and people dying. And when it happened a great sadness replaced last week's chill and then fear - inevitable fear - for those dear young people, for the innocents - the elderly and the children - fear for the world and, finally, fear for ourselves. In the office upstairs there is a small janitor's closet where we rinse out coffee cups and water plants and when a person is leaning over the deep sink, someone walking by can push the door shut on the person. I did it last Thursday morning. The person I shut in the closet said, "Thank you. I think I'll stay in here." I knew what she meant...

> "I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."

It's a relevant topic this morning. Throughout the Bible having faith often means having courage, which is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act in spite of fear. You bet those pilots are afraid. The people in the cities and places where the bombs are falling are afraid. Who isn't afraid? Courage is the ability to act in spite of fear, and courage is the companion of faith. "Perfect love," it is said, "casts out fear."

In a new book titled Lifesigns, Henri Nouwen explores the ways in which fear inhibits and oppresses:

> "We are fearful people," he observes.
> "There is always something to fear." (Page 15/16)

How many times, he asks, do we hear ourselves saying, "What if? How can I? Yes, but," all of which are veiled expressions of fear.

Fear is powerful. Fear of Communism motivated our nation for four decades. It was fear that finally persuaded us to fight an Asian war against the best advice of our most knowledgeable political, military and moral leaders, and to continue to invest billions of dollars arming anyone who will oppose Communism, or anything that looks like Communism, to the power elite, like land reform. Do you care to imagine what the world might be like today had love coupled with courage been the motivator instead of fear; had just a small portion of our investment of our treasure and our lives in fighting Communism instead been invested in hospitals and schools and roads and dams?

Fear is powerful. It is often irrational. Fear of outsiders, those who are different, motivates us to huddle close together for security which often means shutting out the one who is different.

Nouwen's book was written out of his experience in communities for mentally handicapped adults in France. Nouwen names a common response to those who have mental handicaps - fear. We are afraid of them. Irrational fear evolves quickly to racism, a dynamic all people of goodwill must resist and oppose in this hour. A black friend told me that he dreads the moment when, alone on an elevator, the doors open and he sees fear on the face of the woman who steps on. Fear of two approaching black youngsters is what sets in motion all the tragedy in Bonfire of the Vanities. Fear motivates otherwise rational people to buy guns, carry guns on their person, use guns in unprecedented numbers in our city. The most likely victim of the handgun you buy because you are afraid is a member of your own family or circle of friends.

Fear is behind some of the worst mistakes we make.

We are born with two fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noise. All the rest are learned.

Common fears are not very dramatic. Most of us are afraid of debilitating, disabling sickness. That fear motivates us to take care of ourselves, get a yearly physical examination, watch our diet. But that fear sometimes slips into irrationality so that we never take the baby out of the house, or never shake hands or touch another person to avoid contracting a virus or, tragically, we ignore the lump we discovered because one of the most irrational fears of our age is the fear of cancer.

We are afraid of aging and the dependencies that accompany it. We are afraid of loneliness. We are deathly afraid of failure. And when any of these fears slips into irrationality the result can be either obsessive behavior, as in the case of the person who washes his hands a hundred times a day out of fear of illness, or a kind of paralysis.

Fear paralyzes. That's what happened to the man in the story. He was so afraid of what might happen if he failed, so afraid of his master's reaction to possible failure that it paralyzed him. He couldn't summon the spiritual strength to trust the future, to take a chance, to invest his resources with imagination. So he dug a hole and hid it in the ground. Ironically, it was a lot harder to do that than it was to carry the money to the bank. And I'll bet that man was obsessed by the money he had hidden. I'll bet his fear, which paralyzed his spirit, eventually consumed his energy. I'll bet he checked the hole regularly to see if it was still there. I'll bet he was so frightened that he looked out across the field where the money was buried a lot of times during the day. I'll bet he started looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was following him when he went to check the money. I'll bet he didn't have time for anything else in life except his fear.

There are profound fears to which we are subject. Otto Rank, an early psychoanalyst, used to talk about "life fear" and "death fear." Paul Tillich, perhaps the most influential theologian of our century, taught a generation of students about what he called "ontological fear," the fear of "non-being." It's not fear of dying so much as the dreadful sense that some day the world will go its merry way without me, Tillich taught. Some of the most consistent Tillichians around are the characters in Charles Schultz's Peanuts. On the topic of ontological dread, Charlie Brown one day, after a series of devastating and humiliating personal experiences, exclaims, "I wish I had never been born!" And Lucy responds with Tillichian finesse, "Why the theological implications of that are staggering!"

Fear can be physically paralyzing. It can render us utterly impotent. It can so paralyze our imagination, our creativity, our courage, that the only thing we can think of to do with the talent, the resource, or our intelligence, or our passion for justice, or our hopes for our own fulfillment and happiness, or our dreams for peace - is bury them.

Fear paralyzes the spirit which, of course, is what Franklin D. Roosevelt understood when he told the nation in a very dark hour in 1933 that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Fear paralyzes the human spirit and the shape that paralysis assumes is a kind of radical resignation, an utter abandonment of hope, an inability to think about the future.

Lesslie Newbigin thinks it was the spiritual crisis of the Western World long before we got into this scrape. An Englishman who was a distinguished church leader and Bishop in India wrote recently: "Over the developed and affluent Western societies there seems to be the banner, 'No Future.'" Hope runs high in the Third World, he observes; often exaggerated and misguided, but nevertheless strong hope, life-giving, energy-producing hope. [The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 111) Newbigin sees the West having given up on the future in favor of "immediate

consumption, piling up enormous debts, exploiting the natural environment in a manner that suggests we have no real sense of any worthwhile future." [p. 112] And now this... with the end of the Cold War, and hope starting to run high and a peace dividend to invest... and now people are dying again.

The parable of the three men and their gifts becomes a parable for this moment in time, when fear weighs heavily and it is tempting to put hope to rest in the face of this week's grim realities.

But love casts out fear. Love enables us to act in spite of fear. Courage comes from the French word for heart after all. If you love, if you know you are loved, nothing is frightening enough to paralyze you.

Fear suggests that we ought to bury the talent in the ground: risk no adventure of the spirit, no high hopes, no noble aspirations. Bury it! Fear paralyzes. Love casts out fear. The love of parents kept us from being paralyzed by fear of the dark. In the strong haven of mature, adult love, we learn that all sorts of fears become manageable. Lying in a hospital bed facing surgery we know the courage that comes as a gift from someone who loves us enough to be with us.

And sometimes, in the dark night of the soul, when we feel utterly alone, utterly paralyzed by our fear, our doubt, sometimes, by grace, we know that we are loved with a perfect love, a love beyond all comprehending... loved by God, and therefore, there is no reason to be afraid.

So today and in days ahead, may we be witnesses to one another, and together, to a community and nation and world which is afraid and in its fear may make mistakes, and may experience spiritual paralysis... may we be witnesses.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news that we are loved, we and the world and everybody in it - loved totally, without limits, without conditions. The Gospel is that God's love abides with us, dwells in us and around us, and over us.

There is a gift in that love. It's name is courage which is the ability to act, to live, to hope, and to love, in spite of fear.

"There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear." Amen.

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O dear God, we confess our fear this morning and the very real temptation to bury our hope for peace. Save us from that paralysis of spirit. Strengthen us in your perfect love; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.